

Rankings, Reputation & Strategy: A Framework for the Future of William & Mary

University rankings have a significant impact on public perception, enrollment decisions, and institutional strategy. Over the past decade rankings have proliferated and differentiated, and the market share of individual publications has fallen. Yet among rankings publications, U.S. News & World Report (USNWR) remains the most influential for William & Mary's national reputation and aspirations for preeminence.

Historically, William & Mary maintained a strong ranking with minimal effort. However, as competition intensifies, we must actively reinforce our position as a nationally renowned public research university grounded in the liberal arts and sciences since 1693.

In October 2024, the president appointed two working groups to assess William & Mary's current ranking performance — particularly in USNWR — and to forecast changes in criteria over the next five years. This effort is our first comprehensive, university-wide initiative. Group I analyzed the USNWR methodology and institutional data, while Group II examined societal trends that may shape future rankings. This report synthesizes their insights.

I. Performance: Understanding Our Position and Opportunities

Despite consistent improvement in our overall USNWR score, William & Mary's rank has fallen — from the mid-30s to the mid-50s. This decline results from:

1. **Evolving ranking criteria:** USNWR now emphasizes social mobility, faculty research, and graduate earnings over traditional W&M strengths such as small class sizes and alumni giving.
2. **Rankings compression:** Small changes in scores produce substantial shifts in rank.
3. **Increased competition:** Peer institutions are increasingly optimizing their strategies specifically to improve their performance in rankings.

Based on an analysis of our position relative to current metrics, the following strengths and opportunities for improvement were identified:

Current Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
Peer reputation	Faculty research activity and impact
Graduation and retention rates	Academic spending per student
Low student debt upon graduation	Post-graduation earnings (particularly for federal loan recipients)
Standardized test scores	Graduation rate performance vs. USNWR projections

Our team developed an impressive analytical tool to model how changes in these factors could strategically improve our ranking and move us closer to national preeminence.

II. Futures: Navigating Evolving Rankings and Societal Uncertainty

Using Peter Atwater's [*Confidence Map*](#) framework, our team examined how evolving societal uncertainties may influence student preferences and rankings over the next five years. Rankings are likely to place greater emphasis on:

1. **Immediate Return on Investment:** Applicants will prioritize institutions offering clear and tangible short-term financial outcomes, with transparent, reliable data on affordability and graduates' immediate financial success.
2. **Sense of Stability and Belonging:** Students will increasingly favor institutions geographically, culturally, or socially close to home, seeking environments that provide familiarity, security, and community, especially in uncertain times.
3. **Career Readiness across Disciplines:** Universities will need to clearly demonstrate how coursework, internships, and applied experiences within a liberal arts education translate directly into strong employment outcomes, supported by robust job placement data and employer partnerships.

Universities, including W&M, must proactively strengthen their value propositions in response to these shifts.

Conclusion: William & Mary's Strategic Alignment and Institutional Preeminence

Rankings are a vital component of William & Mary's strategy to strengthen national preeminence. They enable us to attract exceptional students, faculty, and resources. By strategically aligning operational decisions, resource investments, and institutional messaging with key ranking factors, we can reinforce our distinctive strengths: excellent academics, outstanding student outcomes, and an unwavering commitment to teaching, learning, and research. With a clear vision and compelling communication of our unique value, William & Mary can shape rather than merely react to — the evolving landscape of higher education.